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ABSTRACT

To investigate whether television viewers respond differently to presidential debaters than radio listeners do (in other words, does visual content significantly shape the way audience members evaluate the candidates?), a study examined the first Ronald Reagan-Walter Mondale debate in 1984. Subjects, 66 adult volunteers (35 assigned to television viewing and 28 to radio listening) from the faculty, staff, and student body of a small liberal arts college, completed a candidate preference form prior to the debate and filled out the main questionnaire immediately following the debate. Results showed that viewers make different evaluative judgments than listeners do; that overall, radio listeners tended to rate the candidates more positively; and that viewer perceptions of a debater's energy, openness, and forcefulness may be significantly influenced by visual elements. Findings suggest that the television factor is an evaluative dimension related to the concept of dynamism; the candidate who seems most forthright and energetic and who best exploits such visual opportunities as camera eye contact will be evaluated most positively by viewers. (Three tables of data are included. An appendix lists the questionnaire items, and 20 references conclude the study.) (SR)

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JUDGING PRESIDENTIAL DEBATERS:

THE POWER OF THE TV FACTOR

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Abstract

Election year 1988 will set a record for the number of televised presidential debates. This outcome is virtually assured by the large number of primaries, the lack of a clear Democratic front-runner, and the relaxation of the Equal Time provision, which gives networks and local stations incentive to stage debates. In addition, it would be unthinkable for the 1988 nominees to refuse to debate when for three consecutive elections the major party finalists have met on television.

But while the debates go on before the cameras, another debate will continue behind the scenes. Which candidates were helped or hindered by their appearance or "style"? Did a candidate hurt his or her chances by an inability to look the camera in the eye? Which candidate looked most presidential on the screen?

Such questions--directed mainly at the television audience's perceptions of the candidates--have followed each major debate. The assumption seems to be that television, as a visual medium, has some special influence over how viewers judge the candidates.

The purpose of this paper was to explore this television factor by asking a simple, and intentionally broad, question: Do television viewers respond differently to presidential debaters than radio listeners? In other words, does visual content significantly shape the way audience members evaluate the candiates?

This study focused on the first Reagan-Mondale debate in 1984. Discriminant analysis was used to isolate differences between television and radio groups and to identify important dimensions of audience evaluations. Results showed that television viewers did evaluate Reagan and Mondale differently than radio listeners. The paper discusses the consequences of these differences for future debaters.

JUDGING PRESIDENTIAL DEBATERS: THE POWER OF THE TV FACTOR

Though rich with opportunity for winning votes, presidential debates provoke terrific anxiety among candidates and their advisors. The stakes are high and the chances of making a mistake are far greater than in ordinary public appearances. And lurking at the heart of the problem is television and its massive audience.

Because of television, Reagan and Mondale in 1984 carefully rehearsed their performances in mock debates staged by their advisors. They also reviewed video tapes of their own and their opponent's past television appearances (Nelson, 1984). Candidate representatives rigorously negotiated such television-related details as the design of the podium (Hoffman & Cannon, 1984).

Similar haggling had gone on in 1980 when the candidates refused to allow the television producers to position a camera at the rear of the stage where reverse angle shots were possible. During preparations, Carter and Reagan employed stand-ins who matched the candidates in height to varify the favorableness of camera viewpoint and lighting (F. Slingland, NBC debate director, personal communication to author).

Scholarly researchers have also been impressed by the potential impact of television's visual presentation on audience perceptions of the debaters. Investigators have examined such factors as camera angles and shot juxtaposition as possible

at least one past candidate and his advisors apparently believed they already had the answer. Mondale in 1984 clearly attempted to give a performance that was softer and more affable than what audience members might have expected from the usually combative former vice president (Corry, 1984). Evidently, a smiling face and conciliatory posture was expected to produce judgments of warmth, pleasantness, or even empathy.

The objective of the present study, which focused on the first Reagan-Mondale meeting, October 7, 1984, was to begin an exploration of the types of unpremeditated (ie. non political) evaluations that viewers might apply to the performance of presidential debaters. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the evaluative judgments that most strongly characterize viewing as opposed to merely listening to a particular debate?

2. Can meaningful differences be identified between the evaluations of the performance of individual debaters who are viewed on television as opposed to being heard on the radio.

In attempting to answer these questions, it was assumed that no universal evaluations would likely be discovered for all debates or debaters. Audience familiarity with the personalities and appearance of candidates, as well as expectations about their behavior in the debate forum, are likely to be important contributing factors to evaluations. Thus, emphasis in the study was on the judgments made about the performance of the

specific candidates observed and the particular circumstances in which they appeared. Second, the study made no McLuhanesque claims with respect to identifying the "message" of different media. Radio listeners were compared to television viewers simply because this method provided the broadest and most accessible insight into evaluations that might be influenced by visual content.

Method

Participants

Adult volunteers from the faculty, staff, and student body of a small liberal arts college participated in the study (N = 63). They were randomly assigned to television viewing (N = 35) or radio listening (N = 28) groups. Six persons out of an original pool of 69 volunteers failed to return responses.

Measuring instrument

A 30 item questionnaire was developed containing descriptive terms chosen to focus attention on the candidates' performance in the debate (see Appendix A for a list of questionnaire items). For example, item 1 read, "I felt I could trust what he was saying." Participants responded to each statement on a five-point scale with choices indicating that they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Research on speaker credibility has suggested that at least three main evaluative dimensions are employed by audiences: trustworthiness, competence and dynamism (Mudd & Sillars, 1979).

In addition, research into viewer evaluations of television performance indicate that empathy or identification are important factors (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Though there remains considerable dispute about the nature of the credibility construct, especially with respect to the dynamism factor (McCroskey & Young, 1981), for the purposes of this study, which was not concerned with credibility per se, it seemed appropriate to include response items that fell in the categories of competency, dynamism and identification/trust. Ten items from each of these categories were included in the questionnaire.[1]

Statistical analysis

Discriminant analysis was the main statistical technique used in this study. This method was chosen because it works much like factor analysis, selecting those few variables that possess meaningfully shared variance and combining them into a discriminant function that can be interpreted like a factor in factor analysis. In addition, the function is used to mathematically discriminate two groups according to their scores on the included variables. Thus, by comparing the mathematically created groups with actual group membership, one obtains a vivid picture of how the groups differ.

Procedures

Two days before the first Reagan-Mondale debate, subjects were given sealed envelopes containing the 30-item questionnaire. Attached to each envelope was a separate candidate preference survey to be filled out prior to viewing the debate. Its purpose

was to check on the possible influence of political bias on results. The survey showed that both viewing and listening groups tended somewhat to favor Mondale, but that there were no significant differences between viewer and listener preferences (F [1, 61] = .045, p > .05).

The main questionnaire was to be filled out immediately after the debate--before listening to or viewing broadcast commentators. Participants were instructed to conduct themselves as they normally would when watching television or listening to the radio. Though this procedure limited control over reception conditions, it was assumed that allowing participants to behave normally would ultimately have less effect on results than creating artificial conditions--such as listening to the debate as a group in an auditorium or classroom.

Three separate discriminant analyses were completed on the data: one for Reagan responses; one for Mondale responses; and one for both candidates combined. It was thus possible to compare reaction to Reagan's television performance with that of his radio performance. Likewise for Mondale. The purpose of analyzing data across both groups and candidates was to determine if viewer response could be generalized beyond reaction to individual debaters.

Results

Reagan analysis

Items containing the terms "frank," "skilled," "colorful," "active," "confident" and "feel concerns" (items 16, 3, 5, 8, 25, 24) were selected for the discriminant function. The relative

contribution of each of these variables can be assessed by examining the standardized discriminant function coefficients, which can be interpreted much like factor loadings in factor analysis (Williams, 1986). In addition, the discriminant structure coefficients, which are the Pearson r correlations between the individual items and the discriminant function values for each case, can be examined as a check of a variable's unique contribution. Table 1 presents a list of these scores. The item "feel concerns" (# 24) has the smallest correlation with function values, indicating that it is making a relatively unimportant contribution on its own to discrimination. In other words, its inclusion in the discriminant function is attributable to its correlation with other included variables (Norusis, 1985, p. 92).

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 also displays the group centroids, which are the average locations for cases from each group as defined by the linear combination of variables in the function. The minus sign on the radio group centroid suggests that this group typically scored lower than the television group. Because of the way the response questionnaire was set up, lower scores reflected a more positive rating while higher scores indicated a more negative response. Thus, listeners generally rated Reagan more positively than television viewers. This same positive-negative relationship also applies in interpretation of the discriminant

function coefficients. For example, the negative coefficient for the term "skilled" (# 3) indicates that when this variable is considered in combination with other variables in the function, it tends to lower function values. In other words, compared to television viewers, radio listeners tended to regard Reagan as more skilled as they made their overall evaluation of him.[2]

The discriminant function correctly assigned 65.08 % of the cases, 62.9 % for the television group and 67.9 % for the radio group. A tau reduction in error statistic was computed, which compared the actual discrimination with the result expected by chance, 50 % (Klecka, 1980). Tau = .55, indicating a rate of accuracy 55 % better than chance assignment. Though this was a moderately strong performance, the separation between the groups was not statistically significant. An *F* ratio was computed for the differences between the two groups on the combined variables in the function: F (6, 56) = 1.73, p = .13.

Mondale analysis

Table 2 shows the included variables, discriminant function coefficients and structure coefficients for the Mondale analysis. Despite their generally strong discriminant function coefficients, the variables with the terms "qualified," "honest," "authoritative," "feel concerns," and "capable" (items 19, 14, 17, 24, 2) had small Pearson *r* correlations with function values (less than .10), indicating that their discriminatory power is shared to an important extent by other variables in the function.

Insert Table 2 about here

Also presented in Table 2 are the group centroids. These indicate that Mondale was more positively rated on the included variables by television viewers. Evidently, television viewers found Mondale more frank, more emphatic and more bold than radio listeners when these variables were considered in combination.

Overall, 82.54 % of the cases were correctly assigned by the function, 82.9 % for the television group, 82.1 % for the radio group. Tau = .77, indicating that discrimination by the function was 77 % better than expected by chance. This separation was statistically significant: F (13, 49) = 4.28, $p < .05$.

Overall analysis

Table 3 shows the included variables, discriminant function coefficients and structure coefficients for the overall analysis, which included responses to both candidates. Items labeled "frank," "trust," and "confident" (items 16, 1, 25) produced the largest discriminant function coefficients. Items labeled "honest" and "authoritative" (items 14, 17) apparently made little meaningful individual contribution to discrimination, judging by their comparatively small structure coefficients.

Insert Table 3 about here

Group centroids, also presented in Table 3, indicate that when all responses are considered, the radio group tended to rate the candidate performances more positively. According to the discriminant function coefficients, radio listeners rated the

candidates more trustworthy and skilled, while television viewers found them less frank, confident and bold.

A total of 67.4 % were correctly discriminated by the function, 71.4 % for the television group and 62.5 % for the radio group. The tau statistic computed for the analysis of .35 indicated that discrimination was 35 % better than would be expected by chance. This separation was statistically significant: F (8, 117) = 3.36, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The results of this study show that viewers do make different evaluative judgments than listeners. The results also indicate that those differences depend on who the debater is and perhaps on preconceptions about the debater's behavior in a public appearance.

Results for the Reagan analysis show that persons who heard the debate on the radio tended to think that Reagan was more skilled and colorful. The function loadings for these terms reflected more positive evaluations by listeners. On the other hand, television viewers found him to be less frank, active and confident. The function loadings for these terms reflected higher scores and thus more negative evaluations by viewers. (Items such as "feels concerns" will be disregarded in this discussion because of comparatively weak structure coefficients.)

The strength of the differences in evaluation is indicated by the discrimination of cases. Only nine of the 28 radio listeners were misclassified by the function, while 13 of the 35

television viewers were misclassified. This separation, however, was not statistically significant, indicating that the actual differences in performance of the two groups on the variables in the function were quite small.

The results for the Mondale analysis were far more clearcut. Unlike Reagan, television viewers found Mondale more frank, emphatic and bold. Radio listeners rated him less knowledgeable, aggressive, sympathetic, proud and trustworthy. (Once again, items with weak structure coefficients will be disregarded.)

Only 6 of the 35-member television group were misclassified, while only 5 of the 28 radio listeners were misclassified. This separation was statistically significant. The variables included in the Mondale function seem to provide a highly effective basis for predicting the evaluations of viewers and listeners, at least with respect to the particular circumstances under discussion here.

In the overall analysis, radio listeners tended to rate the candidates more positively, finding them more trustworthy, energetic and skilled. Television viewers, on the other hand, found them less frank, confident and bold. But perhaps the most noteworthy outcome in this analysis was the rate of correct assignment for viewers as compared to listeners (71.4 % to 62.5 %). Clearly television viewers were highly distinguished by their judgments on items containing the terms "frank," "confident" and "bold" (items 16, 25, 13). Listeners appeared to be more equivocal in their evaluations.

It becomes clear from this analysis that television viewers consistently based their evaluations on a dynamism factor, which included such strong discriminating items as "frank," "bold," "emphatic," "active," and "confident." Whether they were rating Reagan negatively or Mondale positively on these variables, responses related to dynamism most typified television viewers. This dimension also strongly characterized viewer respones in the overall analysis. Listeners, on the other hand, were less clear-cut about their evaluations, with items from all three response categories combining differently in each analysis to characterize the radio group.

This outcome suggests that viewer perceptions of a debater's energy, openess and forcefulness may be significantly influenced by visual elements. In the case of Mondale, for example, the power of such visual elements was clearly very important. Viewers found him much more frank, emphatic and bold than did listeners. The radio group rated him more negatively on such key items as trustworthiness and knowledgeability.

A plausible explanation for these differences is provided by a review of the debate video tape. Throughout the debate, Mondale appeared relaxed, friendly, yet intense. He frequently addressed his opponent directly. But perhaps most important, on virtually every occassion in which he spoke he looked squarely into the camera as if maintaining eye contact with the viewer at home.

On the other hand, Mondale's vocal quality is usually poor,

though he was helped this time by his apparent effort to speak deliberately and slowly (Dickenson, 1985). But deprived of visual cues that might have "softened" his performance, listeners could only rely on a remembered Mondale. With a reputation for being humorless--or even shrill--it is not very surprising that this segment of the audience rated him more negatively.

The video tape also offers a plausible explanation for the evaluations of Reagan's performance. At the beginning of the debate, Reagan appeared tense and ill at ease. He made no evident hand gestures until well into the 90-minute program. On a number of occassions when he was having difficulty mastering an answer, he looked down toward his podium or toward the ceiling, as if visually searching for the correct wording. Surprisingly, at no time during the debate, even in his closing statements, did Reagan look directly into the camera. His answers seemed to be delivered to the audience in the auditorium or to the panel of journalists.

On the other hand, Reagan's vocal qualities generally remained strong, though he fumbled and at times seemed inarticulate. In addition, there can be little doubt that Reagan's radio performance was assisted by his ample familiarity among listeners. His face and characteristic gestures are not difficult to visualize while listening to his voice. Viewers, however, had concrete evidence before them that this was not a vintage Reagan performance.

Conclusions

After the first televised presidential debate in 1960, some reports suggested that radio listeners tended to believe that Nixon had been the winner, while television viewers preferred Kennedy (Barnouw, 1975). Though the validity of this information remains unclear, the results of the present study indicate that viewers and listeners are likely to evaluate presidential debaters differently.

The television factor suggested by this study is an evaluative dimension related to the concept of dynamism. The candidate who seems most forthright and energetic and who best exploits such visual opportunities as camera eye contact will be evaluated most positively by viewers.

The universality of this dynamism dimension, of course, remains unproven in the present study. With other candidates and other circumstances the dimensions of evaluation may change. However, the study does make clear the power of visual content to shape the way viewers judge presidential debaters. The debater who is careless about gestures, physical appearance or his or her relationship to the camera is clearly being foolhardy.

A useful followup to this study would be a similar investigation involving candidates who are less well known. Would less familiarity change the types of judgments that are made by members of the audience? Would it also make a difference if the political chemisty were altered? The results of this study indicate that further studies that address these

questions while examining viewer and listener judgments could be highly informative.

Table 1

Discriminant Analysis for Reagan

Variables included in discriminant function	Function coefficients	Structure coefficients
Frank	.72	.48
Skilled	-.72	-.20
Colorful	-.54	-.23
Confident	.51	.34
Feel his concerns	-.47	-.06

Centroids: Television group: .38; Radio group: -.47

Classification of cases by discriminant function

Actual group membership	Membership predicted by function	
	Viewers	Listeners
Viewers (N = 35)	22	13
	62.9%	37.1%
	Viewers	Listeners
Listeners (N = 28)	9	19
	32.1%	67.9%

Percent of total cases correctly classified: 65.08 %

Table 2

Discriminant Analysis for Mondale

Variables included in discriminant function	Function coefficients	Structure coefficients
Knowledgeable	1.16	.11
Qualified	-1.08	-.03
Honest	1.02	.05
Frank	-.86	-.36
Aggressive	.81	.17
Emphatic	-.73	-.11
Feel his concerns	.73	.04
Authoritative	.70	.07
Sympathetic	.54	.19
Capable	.54	.06
Bold	-.44	-.17
Proud	.44	.11
Trust	.40	.14

Centroids: Television group: -.93; Radio group: 1.17

Classification of cases by discriminant function

Actual group membership	Membership predicted by function	
	Viewers	Listeners
Viewers (N = 35)	29	6
	82.9%	17.1%
	Viewers	Listeners
Listeners (N = 28)	5	23
	17.9%	82.1%

Percent of total cases correctly classified: 82.54 %

Table 3

Discriminant Analysis for Both Debaters

Variables included in discriminant function	Function coefficients	Structure coefficients
Frank	1.34	.47
Trust	-.64	-.10
Confident	.59	.29
Honest	-.51	.02
Bold	.44	.29
Energetic	-.44	.10
Skilled	-.42	-.11
Authoritative	-.27	-.05

Centroids: Television group: .43; Radio group: -.53

Classification of cases by discriminant function

Actual group membership	Membership predicted by function	
	Viewers	Listeners
Viewers (N = 70)	50	20
	71.4%	28.6%
	Viewers	Listeners
Listeners (N = 56)	21	35
	37.5%	62.5%

Percent of total cases correctly classified: 67.46 %

Appendix A

List of questionnaire items in order presented to participants.

1. I felt I could trust what he was saying.
2. He seemed capable of dealing with the subjects discussed.
3. He was a skilled speaker.
4. He seemed aggressive in stating his opinions.
5. He was colorful.
6. He seemed to have expert knowledge on subjects discussed.
7. I felt sympathetic toward him as a person.
8. He seemed to be an active speaker.
9. He was well educated in subjects discussed.
10. He seemed sincere.
11. He clearly stated the issues.
12. I believed him, though sometimes disagreeing.
13. He seemed bold.
14. He seemed to be honest.
15. He seemed emphatic.
16. He seemed frank.
17. I found him to be authoritative.
18. I found him easy to listen to.
19. He seemed qualified to speak on the subjects covered.
20. He seemed to be knowledgeable.
21. He was competent to speak on these subjects.
22. He seemed decisive.

23. His statements seemed reliable.

24. It was easy to feel his concerns.

25. He seemed confident.

26. I could easily follow what he was saying.

27. I could identify with him even though I disagreed.

28. He seemed energetic.

29. He made it possible for me to see things from his viewpoint.

30. He seemed proud of his positions.

Notes

[1]Terms were selected from the following sources: Applbaum and Anatol (1972); Berlo, Lemert and Mertz (1969); Mudd and Sillars (1979); and Whitehead (1968).

[2]It is important to stress that because of the nature of discriminant analysis, interpretation must be based on combinations of variables because the function Value of a particular variable depends on others with which it is correlated (Norusis, 1985, p. 91).

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